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From Conflict to Recognition
Rethinking a Scholarly Paradigm in the Study of Christian Origins¹

Ismo Dunderberg

Early Christ-followers were often engaged in conflicts with each other. While there is no denying this, the question deserves to be raised whether conflict has become too dominant a paradigm in the study of Christian origins. In this field, the notion of conflict provides a major interpretive framework within which the sources are placed into their historical contexts and their relationship to each other explained.

The point I seek to make here is that the emphasis on conflicts in the study of Christian origins has often resulted in one-sided and occasionally unwarranted explanations of the relationship between early Christ-groups.

The problems with the so-called mirror-reading of texts addressing—and sometimes creating—situations of conflict have been pointed out before: we know ‘only one partner in a particular conversation’, authors of such texts may have misunderstood their opponents’ teachings, and scholars may have overinterpreted those texts as sources of conflict and of their opponents’ views.²

My discussion will be focused on scholarly constructions of conflicts in early Christian sources. In my view, the main problems with the conflict-centered paradigm in scholarly usage are that it tends to

- (1) magnify the scope and importance of conflicts that seem real,
- (2) invent conflicts in cases where evidence is spurious or non-existent, and
- (3) neglect (or downplay) other kinds of encounters with the other.

This essay proceeds from a brief reflection on the presuppositions that may underlie the popularity of conflict in scholarly discourse on some Johannine examples illustrating what I mean by ‘magnification’ and ‘invention’ of conflicts. I will then pinpoint two broader issues, each of which poses a challenge to the conflict-centered paradigm. These are the relationship between texts and lived religion on the one hand, and that between texts, authors and social reality on the other. In the final part, I will briefly discuss two cases running against the conflict paradigm, pointing out that there were at least two early Christian teachers—Clement and Origen—who treated their opponents not with disdain, but with some degree of esteem. These cases certainly fall short of being examples of a full-blown recognition of the other, but they manifest some Christian authors’ effort at conducting a respectful dialogue with those suspected of heresy.

1. Conflicts Make History, Don’t They?

¹ I wish to thank my two Helsinki colleagues, Outi Lehtipuu and Nina Nikki, for their close reading of and valuable comments on the earlier versions of this study. An early draft of this essay was presented and discussed at the Department of Religious Studies at Northwestern University in May 2nd, 2018. I am grateful to Christine Helmer and Robert Orsi for the kind invitation, and for the thoughtful response to Jason Springs (University of Notre Dame), who, among other things, reminded me that, in conflict and peace studies, conflict is not merely approached as a negative thing. It can also be understood as one way to determine, and work on, the nature of a relationship.

² Cf. John Barclay, ‘Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case’, *JSNT* 31 (1987), 73-93, esp. 74-83 (quote from p. 76).

The most important precursor of the conflict-centered paradigm prevailing in the study of Christian origins is no doubt Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860), and especially his analysis of the competing parties among followers of Christ in Corinth. Paul refers to such parties in 1 Corinthians: ‘. . . each of you says, “I belong to Paul”, or “I belong to Apollos”, or “I belong to Cephas”, or “I belong to Christ”’ (1 Cor. 1:12, NRSV). While Paul identifies a number of groups here, Baur insisted that the earliest Christ-followers were basically divided into two currents, that is, the ‘Pauline’ and the ‘Petrine’ forms of Christianity.³ This division equated to that between ‘Gentile’ Christianity and ‘Jewish’ Christianity, and it was their mutual ‘opposition’ that, according to Baur, ‘so deeply shaped the relations in the earliest church.’⁴

Baur’s notion of the two opposite poles now seems overly simplistic.⁵ While the influence of Baur’s model is still apparent in some modern studies,⁶ most scholars in the field allow for much greater diversity among early Christ groups than Baur did. This diversity can be seen not only in texts that became part of the New Testament, but also in those included in more recent discoveries of non-canonical early Christian texts, such as the Nag Hammadi Library and the Coptic codex *Berlinus Gnosticus*, which were not then available to Baur.

While Baur’s polarized view on the parties shaping the Christian origins has been considerably criticized and modified, his focus on conflict persists as a focal point in the academic study of early Christianity. Much of the research conducted in this field is driven by a special fascination with conflicts between early Christ groups. Conflicts largely determine our ways of conceptualizing and writing about the story of early Christ-followers.

The continuing attraction of this perspective suggests that conflict looms large in our perception of what history is all about. Most of us have been taught to think that conflicts bring about change and thus set important historical processes in motion.⁷ Hence conflict matters more than periods of stability, and war more than peace in our conception of ‘history.’

Conflict-based historiography may hold a special attraction for those of us conducting research on sacred texts since this perspective enables us to offer fresh insights into those texts that may be unexpected, and sometimes shocking and disturbing. The idea that early followers of Christ were struggling with each other challenges the popular imagination—going back to the Book of Acts—of the earliest phase when those people lived in undisturbed harmony and peace with each other.

³ Ferdinand Christian Baur, ‘Die Christuspartei in der korinthischen Gemeinde, der Gegensatz des petrinischen und paulinischen Christenthums in der älteren Kirche, der Apostel Petrus in Rom’, *Tübinger Zeitschrift für Theologie* 3/4 (1831), 61-206.

⁴ Baur, ‘Christuspartei’, 205.

⁵ Cf., e.g., Terence L. Donaldson, “‘Gentile Christianity’ as a Category in the Study of Christian Origins”, *HTR* 106/4 (2013), 433-58.

⁶ For the most prominent recent example, see Gerd Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* (transl. John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1999). Theissen admirably delineates a theoretical perspective that allows him to integrate different aspects of religion (myth, ritual, and ethics) into a synthesis of Christian beliefs and practices at the earliest phase. Theissen’s ensuing account of the two ‘crises’ that early Christ-followers needed to resolve, however, perpetuates Baur’s dated dichotomy between the ‘Jewish’ and the ‘Hellenistic’ (often identified with ‘Gnostic’) form of Christianity.

⁷ This affirmation draws from personal experience: the tripartite scheme ‘background—conflict (war, revolution, or like)—consequences’ was essential to the way history was conceptualized and taught at my high school.

The notion of conflicts also lends a more human edge to the world of early Christians, which brings them closer to us and our experience of reality. Raymond Brown says this much in his commentary on the three Johannine epistles:

My vision of these Epistles as the record of a theological life-and-death-struggle within a community at the end of the first century has made me want to make them more familiar to readers (and even to churches) at the end of the twentieth century. If I am right, the author of these Epistles wrestled in microcosm with problems that have tortured Christianity ever since and that are still with us today.⁸

As I maintained above, there would be no point in trying to deny Baur's basic insight. Conflicts among early Christ-followers certainly existed. Many of Paul's letters are filled with references to debating, party formation, competition, and inequality among Christ-groups. A close reading of any of those letters suffices to challenge the all-too-peaceful and harmonious account of the emergence of the Christian community offered in Luke-Acts. Paul's references to competing parties in Corinth and his fiery polemics against those imposing circumcision on non-Jewish Christ-followers in his letter to the Galatians may be rhetorically exaggerated, but they would make little sense unless there were among the first-generation Christ-adherents real and serious conflicts which Paul thought required his intervention.⁹ The author of the Book of Revelation certainly had some real-life Christ-followers in mind in condemning 'the works of the Nicolaitans' (Rev 2:6; cf. 2:15) and 'that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food offered to idols' (2:20). Other texts where the opponents are identified and combatted could be easily added, such as 3 John (v. 9), 2 Timothy (2:16-18), and the Gospel of Philip (NHC II, 2, 57/§17; 56/§21; 57/§23; 67/§69; 73/§90), to mention only a few.

One should just keep in mind that such blatantly clear cases of Christ-followers debating about the right teaching and practice are not the entire picture of their relationships with each other. This, however, is the impression that one often gets from academic studies on Christian origins. If it is assumed that conflicts matter more than anything else when history is made, then the study of Christian origins is also bound to be focused on them. This, in turn, often results in one-sided interpretations of our sources, determined by the conflicts they allegedly seek to address.

2. Scholarly Magnification and Invention of Conflicts: Johannine Examples

The conflict-driven approach in New Testament studies entails two specific problems that I shall briefly illustrate with a few examples derived from Johannine studies. One is the tendency to see conflicts everywhere, including sources in which they are not clearly indicated. In other words, the conflict-driven paradigm may lead to scholarly *invention* of conflicts. Another problem is scholarly magnification, by which I mean the tendency to expand the scope of the conflicts addressed in the sources available to us. Magnification usually takes place in the form of posing trajectories from a conflict addressed in one particular text to some later developments in the Christian church. More often than not, these

⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AncB 30; New York: Doubleday, 1982 [repr New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006]), xv.

⁹ Cf. Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading', 86-90, who, in spite of all his caveats about the mirror-reading of Paul's Galatians, concludes that Paul's opponents were real and that some aspects of their identity, views and actions can be inferred from this letter.

alleged trajectories pertain to some key aspects of what was established as Christian dogma in later centuries.

(1) *John and Other Gospels*. John's gospel clearly differs from the three other gospels in the New Testament in numerous ways, but its author neither quotes nor disputes any of them. It would seem an obvious conclusion from this state of affairs that the author of John's gospel was not interested in conducting any kind of dialogue with any other accounts of Jesus. Nevertheless, Hans Windisch (1881-1935) detected in John's gospel polemics against other synoptic gospels. A similar notion of John as a gospel-in-conflict recurs in many more studies on the Gospel of Thomas.

Windisch provided a thorough account of all differences between John's gospel and the three synoptic gospels to demonstrate that John's was written in order to replace and even suppress these other gospels.¹⁰ Windisch maintained, correctly in my view, that all those features that make John's gospel different from the synoptics would have posed serious interpretive challenges to readers familiar with the synoptics. Windisch also correctly maintained that John's gospel does not offer any interpretive help to such readers, who may have found all those differences between John and the synoptics baffling. While these are undeniable textual facts, the way from here to Windisch's explanation of why John's gospel was written is less self-evident. Windisch deduced from the differences an authorial intent for John's gospel that aimed at exclusion and censorship. Thus, he took difference as indicative of competition and conflict. This is no longer a self-evident conclusion.

Even today, Windisch's observations provide a healthy antidote to any easy harmonization of the differences between John's gospel and the synoptics. Nevertheless, his conclusion that the Johannine author(s) sought to put those other gospels out of contention seems unwarranted.¹¹ One indication to this effect is that this option was never seriously considered or realized in the ancient church.¹² Some early readers dismissed John's gospel as being too different from the synoptic gospels,¹³ but those who approved of it also subscribed to the authority of the synoptic ones.

The way the story about Jesus is told in John's gospel demonstrates a great deal of literary and theological independence.¹⁴ This is especially the case if we assume that this gospel's author(s) knew (some of) the synoptic gospels and yet decided to offer a very

¹⁰ Hans Windisch, *Johannes und die Synoptiker: Wollte der vierte Evangelist die älteren Evangelien ergänzen oder ersetzen?* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1926).

¹¹ For my extended discussion with Windisch's views on John and the Synoptics, see Ismo Dunderberg, 'Johannine Anomalies and the Synoptics', in *New Readings in John: Essays from the Scandinavian Conference on the Fourth Gospel in Århus 1997*, ed. by Johannes Nissen and Sigfred Pedersen (JSNTSup 182; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 108-25.

¹² I am indebted to Outi Lehtipuu for making this point in her comments on an early draft of this paper.

¹³ The Christ-followers critical of John's gospel were dismissively called *alogoi* in the early church. The term refers to these people being "without" the divine Word, with whom Jesus is identified in John's gospel, but it also quips about them as being "without reason." For *alogoi*, see Helmut Merkel, *Die Widersprüche zwischen den Evangelien: Ihre polemische und apologetische Behandlung in der Alten Kirche bis zu Augustin* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1972).

¹⁴ It seems that even more conservative scholars, who insist on the potential value of John's gospel for the study of the historical Jesus, agree with this conclusion; for a brief discussion on Brooke Foss Westcott's views, on which many present-day conservative scholars lean at this point, see Ismo Dunderberg, *Gnostic Morality Revisited* (WUNT 347; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 199-201.

different account of Jesus. Literary and theological independence, however, does not necessarily equate to censorship. If the suppression of other gospels were the true reason why John's gospel was written, one could expect that the author(s) would spell out this intention loud and clear. Yet this aspect goes unmentioned in the concluding passage stating the purpose for writing this gospel (John 20:30-31). No other accounts of Jesus are mentioned here, not to speak of the intention to correct or censor them. The conclusion only characterizes the entire text as an invitation to believe in Jesus: 'But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:31, NRSV).¹⁵ The gospel's second ending refers to many more books that could be written 'about everything that Jesus did' (John 21:25). This could be a veiled hint that such books already existed, but even here the author voices neither rejection of nor support for any other accounts of Jesus.

In more recent scholarship, prominent specialists in the Gospel of Thomas have affirmed that this gospel shares with John's gospel a number of common themes, such as one's divine origin, ascent to God, and resurrection, and that they develop quite different views on these issues. While in John's gospel it is only Jesus who comes down from above and then returns to the Father, the Gospel of Thomas envisions the two-way journey from and to God as an option available to all believers. The divine light resides only in Christ according to John, but in all believers (or humankind) according to Thomas. Finally, John seems more affirmative than Thomas as regards the resurrection of the body—at least the risen Christ's scars are described in John 20 as tangible and available for inspection (v. 20, 25-27).¹⁶

It seems unavoidable that such differences between the gospels of John and Thomas have been explained as signs of a conflict between early Christians. One major difference to Windisch is that he assumed a conflict revolving around texts, while those assuming a conflict between the gospels of John and Thomas maintain that it was first and foremost the communities behind these texts that were in conflict with each other. The unfavorable

¹⁵ It is often maintained that the textual variation between two forms of the verb *pisteuein* in John 20:31 (present subjunctive *pisteuēte* and aorist subjunctive *pisteusēte*) yield two different understandings of the gospel's purpose affirmed in John 20:30: the aorist subjunctive would mean 'begin to believe' (and thus be aimed at unbelievers), whereas the present subjunctive would mean 'continue to believe' (and thus be aimed at believers). This may presuppose too dramatic a difference between the present and the aorist subjunctive since 'the subjunctive as such refers to the future' (SGG §1860; cf. BDR §363: 'Der Konjunktiv bezeichnet etwas noch nicht Eingetretenes, hat also futurischen Sinn . . .'). Hence the aspect difference between the present ('continuance', SGG §1860) and the aorist ('simple occurrence', *ibid.*) readings of John 20:31 pertains to what kind of believing in the future the author has in mind. The 'simple occurrence' (aorist) would point to the moment of one's 'getting it' (or becoming persuaded), whereas 'continuance' (present) would point to one's adopting a new course of action ('become and remain believers').

¹⁶ Divine origin and light: Elaine Pagels, 'Exegesis of Genesis 1 in the Gospels of Thomas and John', *JBL* 118 (1999), 477-96; cf. *eadem*, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003); ascent to God: April D. DeConick, *Voices of the Mystics: Early Christian Discourse in the Gospels of John and Thomas and Other Ancient Christian Literature* (JSNTSup 157; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); resurrection: Gregory J. Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1995). For a compelling argument that the Johannine author in John 20:24-29 refers to the scars of Jesus rather than to his wounds, see now Candida R. Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 26-40.

portrayal of the doubting Thomas in John 20:24-29, culminating with Jesus calling him ‘an unbeliever’ (*apistos*, 20:27), has been interpreted as mockery of the cult hero of the opposed party.

Nevertheless, the step from difference to conflict is no more self-evident here than it was in Windisch’s case. The assumption that the figure of Thomas in John’s gospel is a spokesperson for one distinct Christian group is far from clear, and it adds to the difficulty that the scholars making this assumption cannot agree what misguided beliefs Thomas stands for in John 20:24-29. An alternative to the conflict hypothesis is that both gospels developed similar theological viewpoints without any knowledge about ‘competing’ claims in another. It is possible, and in my view likely, that the authors behind the gospels of John and Thomas went their own ways without knowing—or caring about—each other’s theological positions.¹⁷

(2) *Editorial History of John’s Gospel*. The notion of severe intra-Johannine conflicts permeates theories about the editorial history of John’s gospel. The assumption that the gospel evolved gradually, from one literary phase to another, has been one scholarly way to make sense of its numerous narrative breaks and conceptual and theological incongruities. One ramification of this approach has been that scholars have been at pains to impose on each literary layer a distinct doctrinal profile that makes it different from other layers. This approach has often resulted in the picture of John’s gospel as a battlefield of quarreling Johannine theologians, who not only added new materials, but also constantly disagreed with and corrected the views of their predecessors on a number of crucial theological issues, such as christology (too much emphasis on Christ’s divinity in an earlier version was corrected by adding details emphasizing the true humanity of Jesus), eschatology (too much ‘present’ eschatology was balanced by adding references to the ‘future’ one), and the eucharist (references to it added at a later stage).¹⁸ Secondary modifications and expansions can also be explained as resulting from shrewd ecclesio-political calculation in that the editors added elements that brought John’s different gospel closer to what scholars consider the Christian ‘mainstream,’ such as the emphasis on the eucharist (John 6:51-58), and the recognition of Peter’s leadership of the church (John 21:15-19). In so doing, the Johannine editors allegedly sought to secure broader recognition for and the survival of this gospel and their own group in ‘the great church.’¹⁹

This interpretation presupposes an understanding of the sources available to us, not only as ‘foundational’ documents that express the faith of one community, but also as platforms where that faith could be negotiated with and adapted to the beliefs adopted in some other

¹⁷ Cf. Ismo Dunderberg, *The Beloved Disciple in Conflict?: Revisiting the Gospels of John and Thomas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); for a short summary of my arguments, see idem, *Gnostic Morality Revisited* (WUNT 347; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 93-116, esp. 96-106. For another critical take on the theories assuming a conflict between the gospels of John and Thomas, see Christopher W. Skinner, *John and Thomas: Gospels in Conflict? Johannine Characterization and the Thomas Question* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009).

¹⁸ For one of the most consequent advocates of this approach to John’s gospel, see Georg Richter, *Studien zum Johannesevangelium* (ed. Josef Hainz; BU 13; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1977).

¹⁹ Bultmann’s take on the editors of John’s gospel is built on this view; cf. Rudolf

Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (transl. G. R. Beasley-Murray; Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1971 [orig. 1941]).

communities. At the end of the day, the picture envisioned here boils down to the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy: a group suspected of heresy struggles hard to find its place as part of the burgeoning Christian orthodoxy. The problem remains whether any plausible historical context could be offered at this early stage—probably at the turn of the first century—for editors working on stories about Christ in this way. Another related question this explanation raises is whether we are entitled to imagine that there already were people at this juncture who recognized those added ‘ecclesial’ features, most of which are relatively minor textual details, and who because of those subtleties were willing to ignore much bigger problems raised by the very different picture John’s gospel paints of Jesus.

(3) *The Johannine Epistles*. The conflict paradigm continues to determine much of the current interpretation of the Johannine epistles.²⁰ Its dominance has not gone unchallenged (see below), but large chunks of scholarship on the epistles are still focused on the identification of the opponents against whom these texts were written.

Each of the three Johannine epistles bears witness to some sort of conflict. The two shorter ones revolve around the issue of to whom hospitality can be extended. The author of 3 John complains about the refusal of hospitality towards his messengers, whereas 2 John urges its addressees to test the visitors’ teaching before admitting them. The author of 1 John, in turn, is concerned with some people whom he variably designates as ‘antichrists’ (2:18), ‘false prophets’ (4:1), and deserters from his group (2:19), that is, those who no longer believe in Christ (2:22; 4:2)—not at least in the way the author would prefer.

Most scholarly analyses of the Johannine epistles revolve around these passages. It is assumed that the opponents’ presence in these texts, especially in 1 John, is ubiquitous; hence the usual interpretation that the author is also engaged in debate with the opponents’ views at those points of argumentation where no opposition is directly mentioned. Much ink is spilled on detecting the opponents’ slogans in the text, and the theories about their theological profile by and large determine the scholarly interpretations of the message the author of 1 John sought to convey to his audience.²¹

Sometimes this approach results in strange conclusions as regards opponents and their views. The opponents are easily described as morally reprehensible persons, although nowhere in 1 John are they directly accused of any other wrongdoing than leaving the group. Some scholars regard the opponents as being only interested in spiritual progress and, for that very reason, indifferent to issues pertaining to good morality—as if people interested in things spiritual were lax about morality. Scholars can also uncritically side with the author of 1 John

²⁰ The title of a recent collection of scholarly essays on the Johannine epistles may suffice to demonstrate this intent: R. Alan Culpepper and Paul Anderson, eds., *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles* (Early Christianity and Its Literature; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014).

²¹ One recurring literary pattern in 1 John comprises three elements: claim/behavior contradicting the claim/condemnation. By way of example: “If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true.” (1 John 1:6) “Whoever says, ‘I have come to know him,’ but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist.” (1 John 2:4.) It is customarily assumed that the claim in such affirmations comes from the opponents. Yet, as Lieu points out, such passages do not provide a solid ground for identifying opponents. She compellingly argues that the author has no qualms in these cases with the claim part but elaborates the potential discrepancy between the right claim and the wrong behavior. In addition, the author uses generalizing statements to make this point. He nowhere directly accuses his opponents of being guilty of the discrepancy between what one says and what one does. Cf. Judith M. Lieu, *I, II, and III John: A Commentary*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 11-12.

in claiming that the opponents did not believe in Jesus at all. One recent interpreter affirms that the opponents ‘believed that, once they possessed the eschatological Spirit, the inspiration of that Spirit would be sufficient and they would not need the “revelation” of Jesus.’²² This explanation not only builds on, but also exacerbates the author’s polemics against the opponents since that author never went so far as to claim that the opponents did ‘not need’ the teaching of Jesus at all.

One striking feature in the scholarly discussion about 1 John is the suggestion that the community addressed was split over debates about the interpretation of John’s gospel. The most prominent advocate of this view was Raymond Brown, who maintained that 1 John was written to contest a ‘hyper-Johannine’ party that had evolved from a too spiritualized and ‘gnosticizing’ understanding of the gospel.²³

Brown’s view of the Johannine community as split into opposing factions is generally strikingly similar to Baur’s on the quarrelling Christians in Corinth. What Brown added to this picture was the idea that one text—John’s gospel—had assumed such an important position in the life of the community that different interpretations of it tore the entire group asunder. (This new feature confirms the doubt, already raised by Windisch’s view of John and the synoptics, that scholars of texts have the tendency to place the texts they study right in the middle of the controversies they assume took place between Christian groups.)

The main obstacle to Brown’s explanation is the lack of clear textual support. The fact remains that, in 1 John, John’s gospel is neither quoted nor mentioned. Keeping silent about the gospel would seem the most unlikely strategy for an author seeking to safeguard this gospel from incorrect interpretations.²⁴

The scholarly tendency to exaggerate the scope of the conflicts addressed in our evidence is also well documented in the study of other Johannine epistles, especially that of 3 John. The allure of this approach may lie in the fact that it affords greater relevance to this text, which is the shortest in the New Testament. Georg Strecker conceded this much in complimenting Walter Bauer (1877-1960) for being one whose ‘groundbreaking work *rescued* 3 John from the shadowy status to which scholarship had long relegated it . . .’²⁵

Bauer saved 3 John from scholarly oblivion by connecting the hazy figure of Diotrephes with two much larger debates in the early church, one on orthodoxy and heresy, and another on ecclesial office-holders.²⁶ What is common to all scholarly suggestions about Diotrephes is that they place him and the author of 3 John on the orthodoxy-heresy axis, though at very different points. Diotrephes has been described *both* as the leader of a successful heretical

²² Urban C. von Wahlde, ‘Raymond Brown’s View of the Crisis of 1 John in the Light of Some Peculiar Features of the Johannine Gospel’, in Culpepper & Anderson (eds.), *The Communities in Dispute*, 19-45, on p. 43.

²³ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, passim.

²⁴ Brown also operated with a fuzzy picture of John’s gospel. While he insisted that the debate addressed in 1 John was related to this gospel, he remained uncertain whether this gospel existed as a text or a fixed community tradition when 1 John was written. As John Painter points out, the way Brown treated John’s gospel in his commentary on the epistles of John presupposes that ‘the Gospel was known in more or less its present form.’ Cf. John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John* (Sacra Pagina Series 18; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 15-16.

²⁵ Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Epistles: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John* (transl. Linda M. Mahoney; Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN, 1996), 261 (emphasis added).

²⁶ Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (transl. Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971 [German original: 1934; ET is based the second German edition from 1964]), 93-94.

group (Bauer) *and* as a monarchical bishop, who was engaged in a conflict with the author of 3 John and his more informal, Spirit-inspired view of leadership (Käsemann).²⁷ The roles attributed to the author of 3 John and Diotrephes in the latter view are reversed in the interpretation that 3 John written *against* non-hierarchical enthusiasts who ‘represented gnosticizing or spiritual tendencies contrary to the presbyter’s apocalyptic teaching about Christ’ (Strecker).²⁸ The shadow of ‘Gnosticism’ and the image of its ‘charismatic’ or non-hierarchical social structure lurks beneath the opposing interpretations of who took what place in the debate between the author of 3 John and Diotrephes.²⁹

The fact that the positions assigned to the author and Diotrephes can be so easily reversed in various theories indicates that it matters more *that* the two players were engaged in the great battle between Christian orthodoxy and heresy than *where* they exactly belong in it.

The author of 3 John offers precious little information about Diotrephes and his ideas. The author criticizes him for withdrawing the benefit of hospitality from the author’s envoys. Undoubtedly, the debate between these two figures was related to the opinions the author had expressed in a previous communication with the assembly led by Diotrephes (cf. 3 John 9). If Diotrephes sought to persuade others to adopt the same course of action as he had done, as the author insinuates (3 John 10), the debate was no doubt a real one, and not one the author invented just to make a point. In light of other early Christian sources, Diotrephes’s policy of declining hospitality may have involved subjecting visitors to tests examining their beliefs (cf. Did. 11:1-2; 2 John 10). However, the possibility also exists that Diotrephes detected in the author’s communication other kinds of tendencies that he found potentially disruptive in the life of the community under his control, especially those that could have provoked factionalism in the group. The strict division between the ‘true’ and the ‘false’ believers, as attested in 1 John, would have been a real concern for leaders of Greco-Roman voluntary associations of any sort.³⁰

While there is an unmistakable clash between two claims to authority documented in 3 John, there is little to warrant the assumption that the clash anticipated, or was already part of, the grand battle between orthodoxy and heresy in the early church, or that between ‘monarchical’ and ‘spirit-inspired’ modes of leadership. Leadership is no doubt debated in 3 John, but it is possible that the whole debate was not about ‘doctrine’ (as a system of faith) but about other things that could have disturbed the social life of Diotrephes’ group.

3. Rethinking the Conflict Mode in Johannine Studies

²⁷ Ernst Käsemann, “Ketzer und Zeuge: Zum johanneischen Verfasserproblem,” *ZTK* 48 (1951), 292-311.

²⁸ Strecker, *The Johannine Epistles*, 263.

²⁹ For only one example, see François Vouga, *Die Johannesbriefe* (HNT 15/III; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), 11: 1 John betrays a ‘gnostic self-understanding’ that ‘characterizes the (author’s) fellowship with his addressees.’

³⁰ For the concern of factionalism in voluntary associations and how that concern may elucidate the references to the expulsion of Christ-followers from the synagogue in John’s gospel (9:22, 34; 12:42; 16:2), see John S. Kloppenborg, ‘Disaffiliation in associations and the ἀποσυναγωγός of John’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67/1 (2011), Art. #962; for a discussion on how Kloppenborg’s insight could inform our understanding of 3 John, see Ismo Dunderberg, “Dissidents and God-Talk in the Johannine Epistles,” FS Peter Lampe (forthcoming).

Although the conflict mode of explanation still defines Johannine studies, it has more recently been modified in many important ways. No longer do all theories about the editorial stages of John's gospel subscribe to the notion of disagreeing and debating editors. Earlier literary layers of the gospel have also been explained as belonging to the final author's repository of a community tradition,³¹ and the later editorial stages can be regarded as instances of reinterpretation of an earlier gospel.³² Both approaches yield a much more eirenic picture of the literary evolution of John's gospel than previous models. Judith Lieu has since the mid-1980s steered away from the interpretation that all truth claims made in the Johannine epistles would in one way or another be related to the teaching of opponents, and Daniel Streett has recently devoted an entire monograph to the critical analysis of the scholarly theories seeking to establish links between the opponents of 1 John and libertinism, docetism, gnosticism, etc.³³

Much still needs to be done to change the course of scholarship. Most importantly, 'Gnosticism', which still looms large in Johannine (and Pauline) studies, can no longer be taken as the convenient point of reference that it used to be. Many beloved assumptions cherished in the study of the Johannine epistles, such as the links between 'libertinism', 'doceticism' and Gnosticism, have turned out to be unwarranted generalizations based upon eclectic reading of sources that were once lumped together under the umbrella of Gnosticism. Two points have become abundantly clear in more recent studies on Gnosticism. First, the sources traditionally regarded as evidence for Gnosticism betray an enormous diversity on many issues that have been considered to be part and parcel of 'Gnostic' thought. Second, many items traditionally associated with Gnosticism—libertinism in particular—go back, not to the first-hand sources, but to polemical accusations levelled in the hostile sources that were authored by heresy-hunters.³⁴

These developments have led to the deconstruction of the whole concept of 'Gnosticism' among the experts. In consequence, it would be advisable to remove this concept from the toolbox of any scholar interpreting Johannine (or any other New Testament) texts. Greater precision is needed in identifying the individual groups that are used as points of comparison. Johannine scholars maintaining links between the opponents addressed in Johannine texts and 'Gnosticism' regularly operate with a very undifferentiated picture of the latter. For example, the Valentinian sources from the second and third centuries, often used in

³¹ Joachim Kügler, *Der Jünger, den Jesus liebte: Literarische, theologische und historische Untersuchungen zu einer Schlüsselgestalt johanneischer Theologie und Geschichte; mit einem Exkurs über die Brotrede in Joh 6* (SBB 16; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988).

³² Andreas Dettwiler, *Die Gegenwart des Erhöhten: eine exegetische Studie zu den johanneischen Abschiedsreden (Joh 13,31-16,33) unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihres Relecture-Charakters* (FRLANT 169; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995); Jean Zumstein, *Kreative Erinnerung: Relecture und Auslegung im Johannesevangelium* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2004).

³³ Judith M. Lieu, *The Second and Third Epistles of John: History and Background* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986); eadem, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press (1991); ead., *I, II, & III John: A Commentary* (The New Testament Library; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008); eadem, 'Us or You? Persuasion and Identity in 1 John', *JBL* 127/4 (2008), 805-19; Daniel R. Streett, *They Went Out From Us: The Identity of the Opponents in First John* (BZNW 177; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).

³⁴ Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Johannine scholarship, are no witnesses to any general ‘Gnostic’ spirit. They bear witness to one distinct (and diverse) group of Christ-followers, and these people already knew, and were inspired by, John’s gospel. What is more, their teachings were in many ways very different from other Christ-groups who, like them, attributed the creation of the visible world to an inferior Creator-God (such as ‘Sethians’). It would be especially ill-advised to use Valentinians as evidence for people who were interested in spiritual progress at the expense of good moral behavior since all claims about their immorality come from hostile sources and should thus be read with a grain of salt.³⁵

4. Texts, religious experts, and lived religion

I have above used a few Johannine examples to illustrate the problems of the conflict-centered paradigm. The paradigm also entails more general challenges, the most important being the vexed relationship between texts and identity. It is often presupposed that the texts available to us articulate the social reality as experienced by early Christians. This, however, cannot be taken for granted. These sources do not describe the social reality as it was but as it ought to be. What is more, these texts provide us with a more antagonistic picture of the relationships between Christians, Jews, and pagans in the Roman world than other forms of evidence.³⁶ This is because the religious experts from whom these texts stem were more concerned with drawing the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ than Christ-followers in general.³⁷ The discrepancy between the antagonism expressed in texts and the continuing coexistence of people of different stripes has been recently pointed out, for example, as regards Christian-Jewish relations in Galilee,³⁸ and the relationships between Monophysite and Chalcedonian Christians in Egypt.³⁹

Even some of the most polemical early Christian texts provide us with glimpses of the lived religion of common people, who were obviously less concerned with, or perhaps unaware of, the boundaries imposed on them by religious leaders. Tertullian, who in his *Apology* famously painted the image of the true Christians as an ideal group, unified in faith and practice, castigated common Christians in his other treatise *On Idolatry* for participating in Roman religious festivities more eagerly than anyone else.⁴⁰ In later centuries, bishops in

³⁵ Cf. Ismo Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 137-38.

³⁶ Raimo Hakola, ‘Galilean Jews and Christians in Context: Spaces Shared and Contested in Eastern Galilee in Late Antiquity’, in *Spaces in Late Antiquity: Cultural, Theological and Archeological Perspectives* (ed. Juliette Day & Raimo Hakola & Maijastina Kahlos & Ulla Tervahauta; New York & London: Routledge, 2016), 141-65.

³⁷ Boundary drawing can be seen as one aspect of rivalry that characterized the situation of Christian and other freelance experts in religion in antiquity; cf. Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), esp. 190-216.

³⁸ Hakola, ‘Galilean Jews and Christians in Context.’

³⁹ Ewa Wipszyska, ‘How Insurmountable was the Chasm between Monophysites and Chalcedonians?’, in *Beyond Conflicts* (ed. Luca Arcari; STAC 103; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 207-26.

⁴⁰ Tertullian, *Idol.* 14-15. Tertullian here reproaches Christians for participating in ‘the Saturnalia and New-year’s and Midwinter’s festivals and Matronalia’, claiming that they were more eager to decorate their houses for those festivals than non-Christians: ‘You will nowadays find more doors of pagans without lamps and laurel-wreaths than of Christians.’ (*Idol.* 15.1, trans. ANF, with modification); cf. Fritz Graf, *Roman Festivals in the Greek East:*

their sermons scolded Christians frequenting synagogues and adopting Jewish practices,⁴¹ which shows that the boundaries we take for granted were often malleable in the early history of Christianity.

In the Christian Rome, policies outlined in and from the pulpit were turned into legal ones. New laws were issued to delimit interaction between Christians and Jews, pagans, and heretics. Illicit forms of interaction included for Christians participation in Jewish, pagan, and heretic religious festivities, mixed marriages between Christians and Jews, and observation of the Sabbath. The need for such measures indicates that such forms of interaction between Christians, Jews, and Gentiles continued to take place in Christian Rome.⁴² Both the bishops' sermons and new legislation reveal that there was an unmistakable 'tension between lived religion and attempts to stabilize and authenticate a particular form of religious identity as the only accepted alternative.'⁴³

Yet another complication with texts as our main evidence is that the conflicts ancient authors addressed were not necessarily experienced as such by their audiences. The authors could resort to the language of conflict to appropriate importance to themselves and their message. They could describe the situation they addressed in terms of a conflict to lend urgency to the point they wanted to make or the policy they wanted others to adopt. It is thus possible that at least conflicts envisaged in these texts took the historical addressees by surprise. 'It is quite possible for Paul (or anyone else) to count as his foes those who thought they were supporting him!'⁴⁴

In consequence, the texts available to us do not necessarily bear witness to 'communities in conflict.' These texts, rather, bear witness that some learned members in such groups were engaged in conflict with each other or with similar people in other groups. Daniel Boyarin has reminded us that the boundaries between people do not simply exist there. There have always been individuals—experts and leaders—in whose interests it has been to draw those boundaries. Boyarin maintains that 'the borders between Judaism and Christianity have been historically constructed out of acts of discursive (and too often actual) violence.'⁴⁵

In addition, the concept of 'community' needs to be critically assessed. Stanley Stowers points out that the scholarly use of 'community' presupposes an idea of 'groups with a deep social and mental coherence, a commonality in mind and practice.'⁴⁶ According to Stowers, this idea imposes too much unity on ancient people affiliated with early Christian groups. For instance, it is virtually impossible to tell how much different kinds of supporters of the Christian cause took in what Paul said in his letters. Even his most avid supporters probably

From the Early Empire to the Middle Byzantine Era (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 77, 215.

⁴¹ Hakola, 'Galilean Jews', 143n.6; Maijastina Kahlos, 'Meddling in the Middle: Urban Celebrations, Ecclesiastical Leaders and the Roman Emperor in Late Antiquity', in Day et alii (eds.), *Spaces in Late Antiquity*, 11-31.

⁴² Hakola, 'Galilean Jews', 143, with reference to canons 29 and 37-38 of the council of Laodicea (363-364).

⁴³ Hakola, 'Galilean Jews', 150.

⁴⁴ Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading', 80. This may hold true of Ignatius of Antioch as well. Some people may have been unaware of being his opponents before reading his letters; for this perspective on Ignatius, see William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985).

⁴⁵ Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines*, xiv.

⁴⁶ Stanley Stowers, 'The Concept of "Community" and the History of Early Christianity', *MTSR* 23 (2011), 238-56, esp. 242.

displayed ‘partial and selective acceptance of the messages and practices, and assimilation of the teachings to the person’s own interests and frame of reference.’⁴⁷

Stowers argues that it is this mistaken idea of ‘community’ that has enabled scholars to treat the authors of our sources as spokespersons for their respective groups. This latter assumption, in turn, has produced ‘the tendency to read communities behind early Christian writings.’⁴⁸ The ‘communities-in-conflict’ model, of course, duplicates the problem since it presupposes that there were two or more such ‘communities,’ each of which was equally unified in doctrine and practice and thus bound to clash with other similar ‘communities’ with different doctrines and practices.

Both Boyarin and Stowers emphasize the role of the learned individuals from whom the sources at our disposal stem. While those individuals’ views cannot be taken as group opinions, it does not seem advisable to completely separate such people from their respective groups either. I would submit that the religious experts, who sought to set the boundaries, can be regarded as ‘entrepreneurs of identity,’ that is, leaders who take the role of forging the ‘sense of us’ within and for their respective groups.⁴⁹

Two points are worth considering in this framework. On the one hand, religious experts and leaders do not have free rein in the creation of the ‘sense of us.’ They must comply with the acknowledged traditions and other expectations that are already present in that group.⁵⁰ On the other, the ‘sense of us’ does not simply evolve in a group. The emergence of this sense requires an active process by which the group leader works hard to make the goals he or she sets for the group seem as ‘natural’ as possible.

The way the leader defines the group’s identity does not simply lend voice to an identity that is already there and shared by all group members. While a group may never become a full-blown ‘community,’ unified by thought and practice in all respects, it is this kind of ‘ideal’ community the leader, as an entrepreneur of identity, constantly strives to create.

⁴⁷ Stowers, ‘The Concept of “Community”’, 246.

⁴⁸ Stowers, ‘The Concept of “Community”’, 241. He also maintains that this perspective separates New Testament studies from any other fields of the study of ancient literature (247).

⁴⁹ The notion of group leaders as ‘identity entrepreneurs’ stems from new studies on leadership that are rooted in the Social Identity Theory (SIT); for some key publications where this viewpoint is developed, see Stephen Reicher, S. Alexander Haslam & Nick Hopkins, ‘Social identity and the dynamics of leadership: Leaders and followers as collaborative agents in the transformation of social reality’, *The Leadership Quarterly* 16 (2005), 547-568; Alexander S. Haslam and Stephen Reicher, ‘Identity Entrepreneurship and the Consequences of Identity Failure: The Dynamics of Leadership in the BBC Prison Study’, *Social Psychology Quarterly* 70/2 (2007), 125-147; S. Alexander Haslam & Stephen D. Reicher & Michael J. Platow, *The new psychology of leadership: Identity, influence, and power* (New York: Psychology Press, 2011). For one example of this perspective in Pauline studies, see Nina Nikki, ‘Contesting the Past, Competing over the Future: Why is Paul Past-Oriented in Galatians, but Future-Oriented in Philippians?’, in *Social Memory and Social Identity in the Study of Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. Samuel Byrskog & Raimo Hakola & Jutta Jokiranta; NTOA 116; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 241-42: ‘Inasmuch as Paul acts as an entrepreneur of the addressees’ possible past and future identities, the question of Paul’s *leadership* will also be of interest.’

⁵⁰ Theorists of identity entrepreneurship point out that there is a ‘dialectic relationship between (a) leadership constrained by existing social identities and (b) leadership as creative of social identities’; Alexander S. Haslam & Stephen Reicher, ‘Identity Entrepreneurship and the Consequences of Identity Failure: The Dynamics of Leadership in the BBC Prison Study’, *Social Psychology Quarterly* 70/2 (2007): 125-47, p. 127.

The leader plays a crucial role in establishing the ‘received’ opinions, ideals, values, and forms of accepted and declined behavior for the group. In so doing, the leaders must strike a delicate balance between ‘cultural knowledge and rhetorical skill’ since their ways of constructing group identity is constantly under the critical scrutiny of their followers.⁵¹ It is noteworthy that a successful leader has the knack of using the group tradition in a creative manner: ‘great leaders . . . don’t just repeat traditional stories of identity. They innovate. They draw on less well-known strands of group culture. They weave familiar strands into novel patterns. . . . Their genius is to make the new out of the elements of the old and thereby to present revolution as tradition.’⁵²

Identity entrepreneurs are in high demand in all kinds of groups since the ‘sense of us’ matters to most people: ‘social identities are immensely important to individual group members. They give us a sense of place in the world: who we are, what we should do, and how we relate to others.’⁵³ And yet the sense of us does not simply evolve in the group. This is what the leaders are needed for: ‘leaders need to work to create and maintain a coherent sense of “we” and “us” and also to define what “us” means (and does not mean) for followers.’⁵⁴ The ‘sense of us’ is, thus, a *constructed* identity, and the task of creating this construction falls on group leaders.

As the cases mentioned above suggest, the ways the leaders define ‘us’ as against ‘others’ do not necessarily coincide with how the group members interact with those ‘others’ in real life. Some leaders were no doubt more successful in unifying people’s thought and actions than some others. The authority of religious experts in their communities was not a given either. The early rabbis were in general far less influential in the ancient synagogue than the literature they left behind may make us think.⁵⁵ The afore-mentioned bishops preaching against the wrong kinds of behavior among their people demonstrate that these identity entrepreneurs were unable to fully control the lived religion of their flocks either.

Regardless of such problems, identity entrepreneurs aim at creating the sense of us that lends coherence to the groups they lead. Such people must be well-informed, creative, and sufficiently educated to accomplish their task. In consequence, Paul’s affinity with the groups of literate people, which Stowers offers as an alternative social framework for Paul (instead of a Christian ‘community’), is not so much an alternative as a *qualification* for Paul’s claim to

⁵¹ Stephen Reicher & S. Alexander Haslam & Nick Hopkins, ‘Social identity and the dynamics of leadership: Leaders and followers as collaborative agents in the transformation of social reality’, *The Leadership Quarterly* 16 (2005): 547-68, p. 561.

⁵² Haslam & Reicher & Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*, 149.

⁵³ Haslam & Reicher & Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*, 144.

⁵⁴ Niklas K. Steffens et alii, ‘Leadership as social identity management: Introducing the Identity Leadership Inventory (ILI) to assess and validate a four-dimensional model’, *The Leadership Quarterly* 25 (2014): 1001-24, p. 1004.

⁵⁵ Cf. Shaye J. D. Cohen, ‘The Rabbi in Second-Century Jewish Society’, in *The Cambridge History of Judaism* 3 (ed. William Horbury & W. D. Davies & John Sturdy; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 922-90; Catherine Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (TSAJ 66; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997); for a concise summary, see Raimo Hakola, *Identity Matters: John, the Jews and Jewishness* (NovTSup 118; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 59: ‘Even in those matters where the rabbis were acknowledged experts, their influence on other Jews remained limited. . . . the influence of early rabbis was restricted to those who accepted their authority, no matter how they might, have tried to impose their views on people. . . . Frequent references to non-observance of rabbinic ideals suggest that the great majority of the Jews ignored these ideals and that the rabbis had no means of enforcing their decisions upon negligent people.’

leadership among early Christian groups. Paul was no doubt more knowledgeable than most of his addressees of the traditions stored in the Jewish scripture. Hence his ability to draw upon the less familiar aspects of those traditions in crafting the sense of us for his audiences. The same probably goes for the author of 1 John. It is customarily noted that apocalyptic rhetoric figures much more prominently in 1 John than it does in John's gospel. This suggests that the author of 1 John was able to 'activate' less known (or less popular) aspects of the tradition in crafting a social identity for his addressees.

Another point to be learned from identity entrepreneurship studies is that we should not underestimate the followers' intellectual commitment to the group. Group members usually tend to reflect why they belong to the group—hence the demand for specialists who spell out this issue for them.

The authors of the New Testament and other early Christian texts were not free from the constraints issuing from the groups they were addressing. This, however, does not justify us treating their texts as 'community documents' in the sense that they might lend voice to early Christ groups in conflict (or in other forms of dialogue). These texts, rather, bear witness to individual authors who were in constant dialogue with the expectations of their audiences. That dialogue did not dictate these authors' viewpoints, but it was one part of their limits of maneuver. The authors had to be sufficiently informed about, and sensitive to, the already existing opinions, attitudes and practices among their addressees. This constraint still left much room for these authors' creative thinking and their new and innovative ways to affirm the group identity. The survival of the sources available to us is not always indicative of their authors' success in persuading their early audiences to their side, but sometimes this may have been the case.⁵⁶

5. Communities and Texts

One final point of uncertainty in the ways early Christian communities have been imagined is related to texts themselves. The communities-in-conflict theories usually assume that the texts available to us played an important role in the lives of early Christian groups. Interpreters of the Johannine epistles have presupposed that disagreements about one text—John's gospel—could break entire faith communities asunder, while those assuming a conflict between the gospels of John and Thomas presuppose that the consumers of these texts were able to detect in them very subtle hints at opposed groups.

Such a conception of Christian origins presupposes that the early Christian groups comprised textual experts, and not just any kind but such as were very passionate about the

⁵⁶ As indicated above, it is possible that some Jewish rabbis whose teachings are recorded in the rabbinic literature were not very influential in their historical context. On the other hand, it seems clear, for instance, that Paul managed to persuade at least some people that non-Jewish followers of Christ should not be circumcised since this gradually became the usual policy among early Christians. Even the pseudo-Clementine texts, which are customarily regarded as a key witness to a Christian identity with a distinctly Jewish flavor (a viewpoint sometimes peppered with what seems to be anti-Pauline polemics), do not demand circumcision while they urge Christ-followers to follow Jewish dietary laws; cf. Päivi Vähäkangas, 'Rejection and Reception of Philosophy in the Letter of Egnostos (NHC III,3 and V,1) and Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions' (ThD Dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2012); cf. eadem, 'Christian Identity and Intra-Christian Polemics in the Pseudo-Clementines', in *Others and the Construction of Early Christian Identities* (eds. Raimo Hakola & Nina Nikki & Ulla Tervahauta; PFES 106; Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 2013), 217-35.

texts they read since they were willing to part company from those not agreeing with their interpretation. The resulting image of early Christian groups divided on the interpretation of one particular text looks suspiciously similar to the image of the early Protestant churches divided over the right interpretation of the Bible in the 16th century. This image may also betray the biblical scholars' fantasy that all people ought to relate to scriptures in the same meticulous (and sometimes passionate) way as they themselves do as professionals of interpretation.

The question of how many early Christians texts and their interpretations could have played such a pivotal role needs to be asked. Such people were probably few and far between. Recent studies on ancient literacy keep reminding us that few people in the ancient world could avail themselves of an education providing the most elementary skill in reading and writing, that even fewer gained secondary education, generating some fluency in reading and writing (or in either of the two—some professional scribes were illiterate), and that it was only a very small minority that proceeded to higher education providing skills in rhetoric and composition or in philosophical reasoning.⁵⁷ While there were literate people among early Christ-followers, it cannot be assumed that entire Christ-groups were 'textual communities' in the sense that all members of those groups thought highly of texts, actively memorized them, and were concerned about their right interpretation.⁵⁸

5. From Conflict to Recognition: Two Valentinian Cases

One alternative to the conflict-centered paradigm in New Testament and early Christian studies comes from recognition studies. The concept of recognition has in recent years become subject to an increased academic reflection in political science, philosophy, and theology.⁵⁹ Recognition provides a next step from toleration since 'the attitude of recognizing another person or group typically means something "more" than mere toleration. This "more" may consist in a commitment to work together, respect for other convictions, and approval of a general societal or ideological framework in which the coexistence takes place.'⁶⁰

The present theories on recognition are focused on acts of recognition taking place in a more formal way (e.g., between countries, or churches, or other institutionalized social

⁵⁷ Limited literacy: William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Catherine Heszer, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (TSAJ 81; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), esp. 28ff; limited access to higher education: Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁵⁸ It is often assumed that ancient culture was an 'oral' one and that ancient people were better equipped to memorize things they heard in oral presentations. For a compelling argument that there is no reason to assume that human memory has deteriorated so dramatically in two thousand years, see István Czachesz, 'Rewriting and Textual Fluidity in Antiquity: Exploring the Socio-Cultural and Psychological Context of Earliest Christian Literacy', in *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity* (FS Jan N. Bremmer; ed. Jitse Dijkstra & Justin Kroesen & Yme Kuiper; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 426–41, esp. 430; for one ancient author resorting to writing because of his insufficient memory, see *Shepherd of Hermas*, 5.3–4. I find unwarranted the assumption that illiterate Christ-followers admired Christian books as objects, as is suggested by Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MN: Eerdmans, 2006).

⁵⁹ Cf. Risto Saarinen, *Recognition and Religion: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2–24.

⁶⁰ Saarinen, *Recognition and Religion*, 1.

bodies). The perspective of recognition, however, could also be of importance for less formalized relations between people. While polemics characterizes much of the texts early Christ-followers produced, this body of literature also offers glimpses into other kinds of interaction with the ‘other.’ Most importantly, there were some authors who occasionally credited their opponents and showed willingness to learn from them.

My two examples of the attitude of recognition come from the evidence pertaining to the school of Valentinus.⁶¹ This group had been influential among early Christ-followers since the second century, but the group was also fiercely opposed since many teachers associated with it attributed the creation of the world not to the supreme God but to an inferior creator-God. Valentinian Christians were also accused of spiritual arrogance, a disdain for other Christ-followers, and immoral behavior.⁶² Over against this background, it is all the more surprising that at least two anti-Valentinian authors, Clement and Origen, both from Alexandria, show some signs of positive recognition of their opponents’ views.

Origen’s *Commentary on John* (a work he never finished) often refers to, and deals with, allegorical explanations to this gospel by the Valentinian Heracleon. He had written the first commentary on John known to us several decades before Origen. Ambrose, Origen’s patron, who lavishly supported Origen’s work on the commentary, had formerly been a Valentinian, which may be one reason for Origen’s interaction with Heracleon’s views. Origen most often debunked them, regarding them as either based on unwarranted textual emendations, or betraying Heracleon’s Valentinian proclivities, or both. Yet Origen was not completely negative about Heracleon’s interpretations. There are several points where Origen seriously considered the interpretations Heracleon had proposed, even though he finally chose some other interpretation. Origen fully agreed with Heracleon at one point. Unfortunately, in this particular case, the recognition Origen grants to Heracleon takes place at the expense of a third party—the Jews. The point of agreement is Heracleon’s negative assessment of the envoys sent by Pharisees who cross-examined John on why he baptized people (John 1:24). Heracleon had explained that the Pharisees ‘inquire out of malice and not out of the desire to learn.’ Origen not only grants this point in referring to Heracleon as speaking “not without being persuasive,” but he also reaffirms the same view in his own words: ‘those sent by the Pharisees . . . address the Baptist in arrogant and rather senseless manner’ (*Comm. John* 6.51-2).

Clement agreed with Valentinus (whose views he usually rejected) on a more positive note. The point of agreement may seem surprising to us since it is related to Valentinus’s teaching that Jesus, because of his perfect self-control that extended to his body, ate and drank but did not defecate.⁶³ This interpretation probably seemed less awkward to the learned in antiquity than it seems to us. Similar stories were told about philosophical luminaries like Pythagoras, which suggests that by this interpretation Valentinus sought to put Jesus on a par with such figures.⁶⁴ Clement, in any case, found no source of embarrassment in this teaching. Quite the reverse: Clement quoted this piece from Valentinus as supporting his own teaching

⁶¹ This part of my essay draws upon Ismo Dunderberg, ‘Recognizing the Valentinians—now and then’, in *The Other Side: Apocryphal Perspectives on Ancient Christian ‘Orthodoxies’* (ed. Tobias Nicklas & Candida Moss & Christopher Tuckett & Joseph Verheyden; NTOA 117; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 37-53.

⁶² I would assume that the link Johannine scholars easily posit between the idea that the opponents of the author of 1 John were ‘gnostics’ (or on their way to becoming such) and the claim that the opponents were therefore indifferent to good morality largely goes back to such accusations brought against Valentinians in hostile sources.

⁶³ Valentinus, Fragment 3 = Clement, *Misc.* 3.59.3.

⁶⁴ Cf. Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism*, 22.

of the importance of self-control. The way Clement proceeds from Valentinus' teaching to his own interpretation shows that Clement treats this passage as a proof text, from which his own conclusion ensues: 'So we embrace self-control out of love we bear the Lord and out of its honorable status, consecrating the temple of the Spirit.' Clement, in other words, employs a quotation from Valentinus in the same way as he elsewhere employs scriptural quotations.

The two examples from Clement and Origen demonstrate that there were early Christian teachers who were open-minded enough to learn from their opponents and give them at least some credit. Even though open-mindedness does not exactly dominate Clement's and Origen's take on Valentinians, they do display greater openness towards the Valentinians than many modern scholars, who, following the more polemical authorities, such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Epiphanius, have been quick to dismiss the Valentinians altogether.

Conclusion

I should emphasize once again that the point of this essay has *not* been to deny the existence of conflicts between early Christ-followers. I have, rather, taken issue with the scholarly constructions of the past that either detect conflicts where the available sources do not clearly refer to them, or puff up real conflicts by linking them to broader doctrinal debates waged in the subsequent centuries. It is those delicate transitions in scholarly literature from 'difference' to 'disagreement', and from 'disagreement' to 'conflict' that need to be critically assessed.

I would claim that there is also an ethical side to the ways scholars construct the past. The emphasis on conflicts keeps us alert to the fact that the nascent Christianity was not different from other ideologies following its emergence and entailed a great deal of struggle, rhetorical vitriol against the other, and boundary drawing. This much said, I wonder if the focus on conflicts in scholarship may contribute to the naturalization of conflict as the part and parcel of religious discourse. The mere affirmation that conflicts existed may not help us much further in our thinking about how they could be reconciled or avoided. Hence the importance of those, admittedly few, instances of recognition of the other in early Christian evidence—they remind us (and our students) that conflict was (and is) neither self-evident nor the only option in religious dialogue.